Ethical issues in pedagogic research

Abstract

This paper explores the ethical issues identified by a research ethics committee (REC) over a three year period. The REC is situated in a medium-sized university in the north west of England and deals exclusively with proposals for pedagogic research. The purpose of the research was to identify the nature and frequency of ethical concerns expressed by the REC, in order to improve guidance for future applicants. The most common concern was the lack, or inaccuracy, of the information provided to potential participants by which they were expected to make an informed decision about participation. Other concerns included the potential for bias, the lack of information provided to the REC, the provision for fair access by vulnerable groups and undue influence on voluntary participation. The paper concludes that the potential risks of practitioners researching their own students are not given due consideration by many applicants. In particular the potential threats to valid informed consent are identified. Implications for improving the relationship between researchers and RECs are discussed, as is the guidance for applicants.

Introduction

This paper describes a review of feedback, given to applicants, from a research ethics committee for pedagogic research. It will analyse the results in order to highlight the nature of ethical issues highlighted by the committee, and the frequency with which those concerns are expressed. Whereas Educational research is concerned with investigating all aspects of the education world (Opie 2004), pedagogic research has a much narrower focus. It has been defined as teachers undertaking research into aspects of their own teaching and learning (Stierer & Antoniou 2004).

Background

Approximately three years ago a research ethics committee (REC) was established in our University, specifically for appraising pedagogic research proposals. Its prime function was to provide a vehicle for members of staff at the higher education institution (HEI) to gain ethical permission to undertake pedagogic research. The committee adopts a discursive model of ethical appraisal and provides extensive written feedback to applicants. The purpose of this approach is to encourage examination of the proposed research from as many perspectives as possible and to relay this information to the applicants. By giving extensive feedback, the committee aims to enable applicants to anticipate and avoid potential ethical problems not identified in their application form.

The committee also provides a vehicle for external researchers to apply for permission to undertake research with staff or students of the University. If the proposed research has previously been approved by an ethical committee in another institution; the committee adopted a ‘light touch’, looking specifically at the study in the context of our institution to see if any additional issues were relevant. However, out of the four external applications received, none had been approved by another institution. It would seem that it is not the norm in all institutions to require pedagogic research to gain ethical approval from a research ethics committee or similar body: a point noted by Doyle, Mullin and

Cunningham (2010), when an ethics committee was established in their business school. It was also surprising that the four projects were being funded by national, sector-specific funding bodies, none of whom had stipulated a requirement to gain ethical approval. An opportunity arose for discussion with one of those funding bodies regarding this issue and its funding schemes now stipulates that ethical approval is needed.

Applicants to the REC are required to complete an application form, for which guidance notes are provided. The application requires a brief outline of the nature, purpose and methodology of the research. It also requires details of potential ethical risk as well as the measures that will be taken to reduce, or eliminate, the risk. Data collection tools must also be submitted when appropriate to the chosen methodology. Because some methodology necessitates data collection tools being designed at different stages of the research, applicants are permitted to gain outline approval and then forward the data collection tools for scrutiny at a later date, once they are designed. The committee refers to this as a 'staged application'. Applicants are also required to submit a copy of the participant information sheet (PIS) for approval by the committee: before recruitment commences. There are four possible outcomes from the process: approval; approval with conditions which must be adhered to, approval with recommendations which researchers may or may not adhere to; and not approved. All researchers whose application is 'not approved' are given extensive feedback and invited to re-apply once they have revised their proposed research. On the two occasions when this has occurred, one of the committee members, with significant research responsibilities within the HEI, has offered to meet with the applicants to assist them in their research design. On both occasions the applicant has subsequently gained ethical approval.

Rationale

At the end of the committee's third year of existence, it was agreed that two of the committee members[1] would undertake a review of all the feedback sent to applicants. The purpose of this was to glean information about the nature and frequency of issues about which the committee has concerns. This information will be used to provide guidance for applicants to enable them to consider ethical issues more effectively. Our experiences to date have led us to believe that there is a lack of awareness about the ethical issues which can arise in the course of conducting pedagogic research in the higher education sector. In sharing the results of this review with a wider audience, we aim to raise awareness of these issues for those funding and/or conducting pedagogic research.

Objectives

The first objective was to identify the nature of the concerns expressed by the ethics committee by thematically analysing the feedback given;

The second objective was to identify the most frequently occurring concerns raised by the ethics committee. This was achieved by allocating each of the feedback comments to one of the themes identified to establish which issues were highlighted most frequently;

[1] Hereafter, these members will be referred to as 'the researchers'.

The third objective was to utilise the findings in order to improve guidance for applicants by raising awareness of the common ethical issues inherent in conducting pedagogic research. This will allow applicants to pre-empt the committee's concern and explain what steps they intend to take to avoid or minimise such issues.

Finally, it is intended that these results will be shared with a wider audience, through conference and published papers, in order to raise awareness across the sector of ethical issues in pedagogic research.

Literature review

Ethics committees in university research originated in the United States in the 1970s (where they are commonly called institutional review boards - IRBs), initially to protect human participants in biomedical research, but later expanded to cover non-clinical research which involves human participants (Robinson & Curry, 2008). University ethics committees have become more generally more widespread in recent years (Doyle, Mullin and Cunningham 2010). However the literature strongly indicates that researchers are almost universally critical of the workings of these RECs, describing then as overly bureaucratic, burdensome, inconsistent, adversarial, and being more concerned with protecting the University from legal disputes rather than the research participants (Tilley, 2005 ; Doyle et al, 2010 ; Sikes & Piper, 2010 ; Kramer, Miller and Commuri, 2010) Whilst this is not the intention of the REC being examined in this study, some applicants' responses to the feedback indicates that we may be perceived in this way.

Pedagogic research is perceived to be a difficult issue for RECs. Brown (2010) discusses an ethics committee in which some of the members believed that teacher research was fundamentally unethical because using one's own students in research is highly likely to involve some form of coercion. Brown (2010) goes on to suggest that pedagogic research has posed particular issues for RECs, because such research blurs the boundaries between teacher and teacher and teacher as researcher, and student as student and student as research participant. These blurred boundaries were often raised in REC meetings as members tried to separate activities that were teacher/student, and those of researcher/participant respectively. This situation also creates a power differential as teachers and students have multiple roles in the study (Shi, 2006). Shi (2006) documented the almost farcical degree to which she went in her action research project to separate the roles of teacher as researcher and student as research participant, as required by her REC. In addition to these blurred role boundaries, the literature suggests pedagogic research also raises issues of conflict of interest, validity of informed consent, anonymity, and the ever-changing nature of the research focus as a result of the cyclical nature of action research (Shi, 2006 ; Owen, 2004). The REC being studied did not begin its deliberations from a premise such as that described above (Brown 2010) but acknowledges that researching one's own students has the potential for ethical concerns. In such cases, the importance of informed consent and placing students' educational needs above those of the project were considered critical.

In addition to the issue of researching one's own students, pedagogic research often utilises what is sometimes considered as less 'scientific' approaches and designs.

Lincoln and Tierney (2004) concluded that ethics committees are less likely to approve unconventional research or research that uses experimental designs. The former perhaps because of a lack of confidence in appraising the design, whilst the latter may suffer from an over familiarity which can lead to fixed expectations. Hemmings (2006) commented that, in her experience, proposals involving action research methodology met difficulties due to committee members' lack of familiarity with this methodology. Hemmings (2006) went on to claim that practitioner action research, when the researcher is a participant "insider", poses special difficulties for ethics committees. In effect the researcher is studying the impact of actions they are initiating and, in other research methodologies, this would pose an unacceptable level of influence over the findings.

Other than the difficulties of researching one's own students, there has been limited research into the precise nature of ethical concerns, raised by RECs, about pedagogic research proposals. Haggerty (2004) reported the main concerns related to possible harm to participants, complexities surrounding informed consent, and presumptions of anonymity. Hemmings (2006) cited respect for persons (informed consent), beneficence (benefits of the study), and justice (fair procedures and equality of benefits and burdens) as the chief concerns. Both of these were North American studies and provided a comparison with our small scale study in the UK. At present, the literature indicates widespread dissatisfaction with ethics committees generally. Open, constructive communication between researchers and ethical committees has been shown to minimise ethical concerns and improve the relationship between researchers and RECs. Sharing information as to the possible concerns of such committees will hopefully allow researchers to address these concerns in their proposals before submitting to the committee.

Methodology

This small qualitative study takes, what might be viewed as, an historical approach to investigating the concerns of a particular REC over a period of time in the past. The first two objectives for this study, seek to look back over this early period in the life of the REC; before using that data to develop practice in the future.

Design and method of data collection

A documentary research method is the sole method of data collection used to investigate the concerns expressed by the REC, to applicants, in the first three years of its existence. Punch (1998) pointed out that this method is commonly used in conjunction with other methods, but rarely used as a sole method in social science research. This situation had not altered when Mogalakwe (2006, 221) claimed that despite the fact that this method is often equally as effective, and far less resource intensive, it is neglected, and often "marginalised" in social science. Mogalawke (2006) suggests this may be due to a mistaken belief that all research must generate new data, which undermines the relevance of existing data to answer research questions. In this case looking back to what had concerned the REC in the past three years, the most reliable source of data was the documents produced in that time. Using questionnaires, or interviews, to ask the REC members what had concerned them over the same period would produce an account influenced by their current thinking, whereas the documents demonstrated the thinking at

the time. Although the feedback is collated by the Chair, it incorporates the views of all members. All documents were produced within 48 hours of each meeting and reflect an accurate account of what was discussed. It is acknowledged that the expression of these concerns is influenced by the author of the documents, as is the priority given to each of the concerns. However, as all comments were included in the analysis, the priority is not an issue.

Bryman (2004) highlights the fact that a documentary research method involves documents not produced for the purpose of research. The researcher uses documents which were produced for another purpose but are available for assembling and analysing (Bryman 2004). Scott (1990, cited by Bryman 2004) suggested four criteria for documents utilised as research data: they must be authentic, credible, representative and comprehensible. The documents used here met all four criteria. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006) describe two classifications of documental data; primary and secondary. Primary documents should be "original to the problem" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2006, 161). As the documents in this study were produced to record and communicate the concerns of the REC, they clearly meet the criterion of primary data.

Written feedback given to applicants from September 2007 to September 2010 was included in the study. Because the committee permits 'staged application,'[2] some applicants received up to three sets of feedback for the same project. Also some applicants had applied for more than one project. To simplify the process, for the purpose of this study, it was agreed that each applicant would be assigned a number and the feedback given to that applicant was recorded against that number. Only the researchers have access to details regarding applicants and their assigned number. In total twenty two applicants were included in the study.

Although the feedback is authored by the Chair of the committee, thus not produced for the purpose of research, the researchers believed REC applicants should be given the opportunity to decline permission for their feedback to be used in this study. Each applicant was contacted via email and the project explained. Applicants were asked to respond by a particular date if they did not wish their feedback to be included. All applicants 'opened' their email and none of them chose to opt out of the study.

The documental data included in the study comprised 182 pages of A4. The nature and format of the feedback was mixed. For example, some was in memo format whereas for other feedback, the Chair had used track changes. Track changes were usually reserved for Participant Information Sheets (PIS) and/or questionnaires. This use of different formats made the analysis more difficult than had it all been given in a consistent style. It also made the feedback appear excessively long at times.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was adopted as the method of data analysis. Bryman (2004) claims:

> "This is probably the most prevalent approach to the qualitative analysis of the documents. It comprises a

[2] For example, submitting further details of data collection tools as the project progresses and the tools are developed.

> searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analysed"
>
> (p, 392)

Braun and Clarke (2008,p79) describe thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". They go on to say that thematic analysis differs from other forms of analytical methods for qualitative data, in that it is not bound by a specific theory such as grounded theory. Our analysis was inductive which Braun and Clarke (2008) describe as:

> "a process of coding the data *without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytical preconceptions. In this sense the thematic analysis is data driven".
>
> (p83)

We used a semantic approach; progressing from describing patterns in the semantic content of the philosophies, to offering some interpretive analysis of the significance and implications of those patterns. In order to do this we followed the six phase outline described by Braun and Clarke (2008).

- Familiarising ourselves with the data;
- Generating initial themes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report.

After familiarising ourselves with the complete data set, we used a sample for much closer reading to generate some initial themes. From this, 14 initial themes were identified by the researchers. The complete data set was then examined for evidence of the fourteen themes. This was achieved by entering excerpts from the feedback under the most applicable heading. Two of the researchers undertook this stage of the analysis. One researcher analysed data from applicants 1-10 and the second researcher analysed that of 11-22. No further themes were necessary during the analysis and all feedback could be allocated to one of the themes identified in the initial stage of the analysis. The analysis was then checked and agreed with the other researcher. Each excerpt represented a concern, concept, instruction or query. Sometimes this was expressed in one sentence but often it spanned over several sentences. In most cases direct quotations were used. Where the Chair had explained an issue in some depth, a summary might be used for theme allocation. This was clearly indicated so that associate researchers could check the summary was an accurate reflection.

Two further reviews of the themes were undertaken jointly by the two researchers, in order to consolidate the themes to a manageable amount. A small number of themes were found, on review, to be repetitive or redundant. Once it was agreed that no further consolidation was possible, eleven themes remained. The amount of excerpts under each theme was calculated in order to indicate the frequency with which each

theme occurred. The researchers were concerned that eleven was rather a large number of themes. However, given the exploratory nature of this study, further consolidation was felt to be counter-productive. It would have necessitated sub themes within the main themes in order to highlight the key issues of concern contained within the latter. Comments were assigned to one of theme only; not double counted. Where comments could feasibly be assigned to more than one theme, inter-rater coding was confirmed by the other researcher.

Results

This section discusses the findings in respect of the study's objectives. With regards to the second objective, Table 1 provides a summary of the findings in relation to the frequency of concerns being raised in the feedback. The frequencies are shown by theme. *Table one would be positioned here*

To illustrate the nature of the concerns allocated to specific themes, Table 2 provides two examples from each theme. These examples are direct quotes from the feedback given to applicants. *Table two would be positioned here*

For the purpose of this paper, the following outline of the results focuses primarily on the most frequent themes.

The most common theme, by far, was that of 'insufficient/inaccurate information for participant decision making'. All feedback comments relating to this theme were directly linked to the PIS. This is not surprising as many members of the committee view this as one of the most crucial documents submitted as part of an application. This document facilitates REC members to view the project through the lens of a potential participant, rather than an academic and, consequently, provides evidence as to whether potential participants are able to make informed decisions, or not. Often the information was available elsewhere in the application but had not been included in the PIS. The frequency of feedback comments in this theme have been recorded as 77. Most applicants received multiple comments under this theme. Only five of the twenty two applicants did not receive any feedback under this theme. The number of comments for each applicant ranged between one and nine regarding additional information potential participants ought to be given. These can be summarised by the following quote:

> "The PIS would benefit from revision to ensure participants have all the necessary information in a user-friendly style……to give clearer details of what will happen, when and by whom."
>
> (Applicant 22)

The second most frequently occurring area of concern was that of potential for bias/invalid data collection and/or analysis. Within the category two thirds of the comments referred to the data collection, and one third about the analysis. The most common concern about the data analysis was that the researchers provided little or no information about how they intended to analyse the data collected. Whilst there were one or two legitimate cases where analysis for all proposed methods could not be finalised

until after some initial data collection, in the majority of cases the applicant simply did not provide sufficient detail about their intentions. Whilst this related to qualitative methods in the main, there were also examples of quantitative data collection where details about how the data would be analysed were insufficiently articulated as indicated in the feedback below:

> "From an ethical perspective, there is concern that a lack of planning for statistical interrogation of the data may compromise the effectiveness of the project."
>
> (Applicant 18)

There was only one case where the concern was more related to a potential for bias rather than insufficient detail on the proposed analysis. This related to a project where two of the participants in a qualitative study with a small sample were also acting as supervisors for the researcher. It was felt that this may inhibit the researcher's analysis of data. The following feedback was given:

> "You may be reluctant to critically analyse and evaluate the responses from these participants, if such analysis may be critical. There may be data you collect from other participants that you feel unwilling to utilise because it is critical of your supervisor(s). Your supervisor has significant institutional responsibility in this area."
>
> (Applicant 16)

Although there was only one such issue in this sample, there is potential for similar situations when researching pedagogic policy and practice; particularly in small institutions. It is feasible that the study sample is likely to be drawn from the same small population that would be best placed to supervise such a project. There is also the potential problem of attempting to anonymise the data when there is only one, or possibly two people, who are in positions from which such data could possibly arise.

Concerns about data collection included the ability of the data collection tool to answer the research questions; the amount of data being collected; and particularly the construction of questionnaires. Concerns were raised when data, particularly demographic data, were being collected were superfluous to the stated research questions. Feedback on questionnaires illustrated concern about lack of instructions and ambiguous questions which posed a risk of eliciting unusable data.

There were fewer concerns about interview and focus group schedules. There were concerns, however, about the use of observation as a data collection tool in two applications. The concerns related to lack of clarity about what the observer was observing, and how that observation would be recorded or analysed.

The third largest category represents the request for further information or clarification from the applicant. Inviting applicants to clarify and/or expand on issues appears to be a common characteristic of RECs (e.g. Doyle, Mullin and Cunningham 2010; Tilley 2008), some of which constitute ethical concerns such as vulnerability and informed consent. The examples we give in Table 2, however, illustrate that the feedback

does not necessarily represent an ethical concern by the REC. Nevertheless, the committee feels that in order to make a thorough appraisal of the application, further information is needed. The nature of the feedback requesting clarification falls into the categories noted by Tilley (2008). First, there is 'Surface clarification' which has included requests for more detailed information, for example, about the data collection tools and the nature of research assistants' involvement in the research. 'Substantive clarification' includes issues such as participants' vulnerability, privacy and confidentiality. Much of the feedback has comprised a mix of both surface and substantive clarification and, for the applicant, might be interpreted as a 'to do' list. It is acknowledged that requesting and gaining such information can cause unwelcome delays for the applicant and can exacerbate the impression of ethics approval being a hurdle to jump, rather than a developmental opportunity. In order to assist applicants to avoid this problem, the REC has recently begun inviting applicants to attend the meeting in person. In addition the applications have to be submitted a week prior to the meeting. This gives the Chair the opportunity to anticipate potential areas that are unclear, or not fully explained,, and request further information to avoid unnecessary delay..

Making provision for vulnerable groups to participate, in our view, occurs surprisingly often in the feedback. Perhaps more surprising than the actual frequency, is the nature of the concern. The most common response, in applications where the feedback raises concerns, is that the research project is not targeting vulnerable groups. This would seem to indicate some misunderstanding of the term. Whilst the term 'vulnerable' is contentious in a philosophical sense, it is common parlance in research terms. It might be anticipated that an understanding of what might be referred to as a 'vulnerable groups' would exist in a HEI.

The issue of undue influence appears as a theme but with relatively low frequency. However, there are several other issues which have the potential to impact on the principle of voluntary consent to participate. The first of these, as indicated above, is the nature of pedagogic research because it is not always clear where practice development ends and where research begins. The second is the issue of insufficient information for decision making by potential participants. These will be discussed further in the next section.

Discussion and implications for practice

From the results outlined above, several ethical issues emerge which have specific relevance to pedagogic researchers. First; the nature of pedagogic research may present a risk to voluntary participation because the distinction between practice development and the research itself is not always clear. This lack of clarity by the researcher may result in confusion about what students must participate in as part of the programme of study, versus what they can choose to participate in. The fact that the pedagogic researcher is often occupying dual roles of both researcher and teacher can exacerbate this problem, along with the fact that data are often collected during 'teaching' time. Such confusion may also influence the students' decision to participate. This, in turn, could impact on the validity of consent, as discussed below. Whilst the benefits of pedagogic research are that the teacher/researcher gains an understanding of pedagogic dynamics and has the

opportunity to reflect on their own practice (Stierer & Antoniou 2004), the very nature of such research presents challenges. Whilst the risk of harm is relatively low, compared to other forms of research on human subjects, researchers should be cognisant of this potential risk and take measures to reduce the likelihood of it occurring. It is clear from this sample, that this risk is not always given due consideration when inviting volunteers to participate.

The context in which most pedagogic research takes place, together with the institutional value placed on such research, may further exacerbate this issue. Most practitioners in our institution undertake pedagogic research without funding or teaching remission, and the majority of studies are small-scale with a single researcher. It is mainly driven by a desire to problem solve using a systematic approach (Gurung & Schwartz 2009), together with a desire to collect evidence of effectiveness/impact. Practitioners are mainly undertaking such research alone, which not only means that dual roles of teacher and researcher are a practical necessity, but it also means that benefits of critical collaboration are not afforded to the researcher. An institutional mechanism for facilitating collaboration for researchers with common interests would prevent duplication and provide possible dilution of the dual role issue. Likewise, promoting a pedagogic research culture which facilitates the use of supportive 'critical friends' could afford lone researchers the opportunity of an alternative perspective. For the past four years, in this institution, five grants of up to £10,000 have been available for pedagogic research each year. This has encouraged larger-scale, collaborative projects, usually discipline based, and a supportive monitoring system is in place. There is also a mechanism for bringing together researchers bidding for the same external grants. More now needs to be done to support the lone researcher investigating their own teaching practice, outside of any funding structure. Providing such support would also demonstrate that the institution valued this type of research.

Secondly, and probably related, is the issue of insufficient and/or inaccurate information being given on the PIS. The ethical implication of this is invalid consent. Although all applicants recognised the need for a 'consent form' it might be that the conditions necessary for valid consent are not fully understood. The three necessary conditions for informed consent are capacity, sufficient information and an absence of undue influence (Pedroni and Pimple 2001). In the case of adults, capacity is assumed unless the researcher can establish otherwise (Department for Constitutional Affairs 2007), which covers the vast majority of higher education pedagogic research. The PIS, and the opportunity to ask for further clarification, are viewed as facilitating the second condition. On reviewing our guidance we found that there is no explicit link made between the PIS and the ethical principle of informed consent. Informed consent, in turn, is the way in which participants manifest their personal autonomy (Beauchamp and Childress 2001). Therefore the way in which researchers approach and satisfy the conditions for informed consent, demonstrates their respect for the personal autonomy of potential participants.

Insufficient or incomplete information could also impact on the third condition. Whilst the committee may have assumed that the lack of information was an oversight, withholding information or wording it favourably could be construed as trying to influence people to participate. The suggestion of coercion to participate by means of insufficient or inaccurate information conjures up serious violations of research ethics

and applicants would, most likely, be highly offended by such a suggestion. However, manipulation of information for a favourable response could be viewed as such. Faden and Beauchamp (1986) discuss the notion of a continuum between persuasion and coercion, upon which manipulation of information can lie. Whilst there were no examples of explicit deliberate coercion, there were examples where of potential participants may have felt they would have made a different decision had they been in armed with all the information. For example one study invited students to attend a workshop to demonstrate their use of particular software. From the application the committee understood that the researchers were in fact assessing the performance of the participants but the term 'assessment' had not been used. Potential participants may well have been put off by the information that they would be assessed. Thus avoiding the use of the term 'assessment' would be more persuasive. Faden and Beauchamp (1986) argued that manipulation of information towards the 'persuasion' end of the continuum can sometimes be acceptable in research, depending on the potential harms and benefits of participating. In this case, the result of the assessment had no impact whatsoever on the students' degree results and no individual 'scores' would ever be published. However, the researchers need to make the argument for such actions in their application, but first they must have an awareness of the implications of manipulating the information given.

It is tempting to say that the implication of these findings is to give even more guidance, or provide exemplars of what is required for each method of data collection. However, the researchers feel that this may perpetuate the notion of ethical approval being a bureaucratic process rather than an opportunity to reflect carefully on the ethical implications of all aspects of one's research, and a learning experience. Rather than increase guidelines or insist on compliance with a uniform template, less is sometimes more thought provoking. Perhaps it would be more effective to remind applicants of the ethical principles which underpin the necessity for a comprehensive PIS. This may facilitate viewing the PIS through the eyes of the potential participant. It is also recommended that researchers be reminded that the PIS is an invitation to participate and, by inference, something that can be declined. This concept should underpin the tone and language of the PIS.

Conclusion

As a result of our analysis of the findings, we have concluded that ethical considerations for informed consent in pedagogic research are not fully appreciated by many researchers. The issue is viewed more practically as the act of obtaining written or implied consent to participate, rather than the process which must underpin the gaining of such consent. Although the first of the necessary conditions for informed consent may be assumed in higher education, the other two conditions require careful consideration. The information needs to be accurate, understandable, comprehensive, and clearly establish what is voluntary. Because the researcher may well be occupying dual roles, and the boundaries between practice development and research blurred, particular attention is

needed to minimise undue influence on potential student-participants to participate. We use the term 'minimise' to reflect the reality that, despite assurances to the contrary, some students may, nevertheless, feel an obligation to participate in research being undertaken by their teacher. In general our findings mirror those found in the limited literature on this topic.

Having identified the concerns of the REC, and the frequency with which they occurred, we will use these findings to assist future applicants. It appears that extensive guidance on completing an application and the arrangements for Research Governance may not be effective in facilitating applicants to view the ethical approval process as an opportunity for development, rather than a barrier to be overcome. This REC will consider re-drafting the guidance into a matrix format on a single side of A4, with bullet point prompts for consideration and emphasise the above points. In respect of the feedback to applicants rather than merely inviting applicants to attend, this will be strongly encouraged as it is recognised that the extensive written feedback given to applicants may be viewed less positively by them than face to face feedback. It is difficult to achieve the right tone with one-way written communication. By encouraging applicants to attend the committee can adopt more of a dialogic approach to eliciting the additional information, which is so often required. This approach will also provide an opportunity to assist applicants in considering the PIS from the viewpoint of a potential participant and recognise, for themselves, that insufficient information has been given. Where there is confusion about the term 'vulnerable groups' this too could be explored in dialogue. It is hypothesised that a two-way dialogic approach to feedback will be less confrontational and more likely to achieve development, as opposed to compliance. It is clear from our analysis that it is not only novice or less experienced researchers who may benefit from a raised awareness of the risks to valid consent, which pedagogic research may pose. Therefore dissemination of these results should aim to reach a broad range of researchers in the field.

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